A Brief Review of the Unity School Syllabus with Suggestions for Change

After ten years of working with the present structural syllabus and materials it has become absolutely necessary to take steps for revision and make decisions for change. In this document an attempt will be made to discuss the needs for change, review the existing Unity School Syllabus and provide alternatives for change. It is a good coincidence that the English Syllabus at the Higher College of Education is also being revised and any sort of co-ordination in this field will, no doubt, be of great benefit.

The Need For Change:

Nobody today can deny the fact that English at school level is deteriorating in this country and unless serious attempts are made to improve the situation, English language teaching and learning would become a hateful duty. The field studies carried out by the English Language Section at the Educational Research Centre, Aden, showed that the ratio of those who achieve the objectives of teaching and learning English at school level is very low.

Although the English curriculum alone cannot be held responsible for this unpleasant situation, one should bear in mind that in this country any curriculum change is usually followed by parallel changes in in-service teacher training as well as school leaving examinations.

The need for change can also be derived from the following sources:

I. The general aim of education in the P.D.R.Y. is to creat the universally developed personality (Law of Education No: 26 / 1972). This implies that the Yemeni personality should be the centre of the process of Education and all possible efforts should be exerted to ensure its continuous development.

2. The document of evaluating the construction of the 8 - year Unity School adopted by the 2nd Educational Congress clearly emphasised the following issues :

^^ Democracy in education means, among other things, introducing a good type of education which services the development of the homeland.

^^ Using different methods is a good phenomenon that has to be developed and supported to improve the E L T situation.

^^ The document also emphasised the importance of the following methods which help the development of creatirity [creativity] and self-confidence.

(a) The joint-work method whereby the teacher guides discussions so as to acquire new knowledge consolidate previously acquired knowledge or evaluate the learner.

(b) The independent work method is which the tasks are solved by pupils independently and the teacher's rele is to 'guide' them indirectly or directly to find suitable solutions by themselves.

3. Among other things the basic conditions for curricula may best be seen in the extent to which it conveys solid up-to-date scientific knowledge and develops the mental faculties of students through popularising discovery, creature [creative] thinking and problem solving.

4. There is a gap between the objectives of teaching English at school level and the existing curriculum (see the review below and the appendix)

Field studies also showed that there is a gap between the intended curriculum and the actual curriculum in schools.

5. In fact the existing curriculum tasks most of points mentioned in 2 & 3 also.

A Brief Review of the Unity School Syllabus.

Objectives:

The syllabus stated five objectives for the teaching and learning of English at the Unity School level. The objectives are based on the four language skills L S R W (see the appendix). One is tempted to inquire about what the lessons are expected to understand, speak, read and write. The syllabus understands this in terms of the lexical items and grammatical structures 'only'. No reference has been made to learners needs and interested nor is there any indication to the use to which those structures may be put e.g. language functions.

The objectives seem, to a great extent to be ideal as they require a high level of correctness and fluency. Moreover, the achievement of such objectives cannot be seen before the end of the target stage. Under such conditions the learners cannot feel the practical use of what they learn. This may be demotivating and learners may doubt their capatilities of learning a foreign language. It can be noticed that teachers as well as materials writers get little help from the objectives in their present shape.

In this case 'aims' is a more suitable term than objectives since objectives tend to be more specific and include more details. it would be necessary to specify general objectives for every form and specific objectives for every unit of the syllabus.

In spite of the above observations the objectives seem to be attractive but their realization under the domination. of the structural approach remains unrealistic ambition. To say the truth the characteristics of the students implied by the objectives are not found even in the majority of the secondary school leavers. Our daily work with the students at college level and the results of the secondary school leaving examinations provide sufficient evidence for this.

Lexical Items:

The syllabus does not state the lexical items that should be taught at school level nor does it give useful criteria for their selections. It is mentioned that the 2000 words that are supposed to be mastered by the end of the Unity school should be relevant for describing self, classroom, school, home and garden (Page 9). Self, classroom, school, home and garden are considered as centres of interest which to my mind, should be reconsidered. On the other hand confining the lexical items to the process of descriptions lead to the absence of some action verbs in the text-books and the materials writers tend in some cases to select words that come most readily. These issues contribute to the general weaknesses in the students productive ability.

Syntactic aspects:

As in the case of lexical items the criteria for selection are not clearly stated. The introduction of the syllabus mentioned that it is structurally graded. It seems that the structures were selected and graded according to their grammatical simplicity as well as the simplicity for room demonostration.

Within the frame work of the structural approach and the domination of 'usage' over 'use' which as some studies suggested, lead to the decrease in motivation on the part of the learner, one can conclude that as time passes little attention will be paid to the items which are grammatically speaking difficult

The main defect of the syllabus is its negligence of the important element of meaning i.e what one can do with structures and what they are appropriate for. (functions and appropriatiness). This situation is made even worse by the fact that the learning tasks which appear in the form of exercises and classroom traditional grammar drills are not presented in a meaningful way and many exercises tend to test outcomes instead of helping the process of learning and the development of positive learning strategies. Under such conditions the structures remain abstract and their realization as use is doubtful.

Teaching procedures

It can be easily observed that the methodical hints provided by the syllabus aim at explaining the structures for their own sake. It is quite common to find teachers holding objects or performing actions, which all pupils clearly see, and at the same time use structures that describe the objects or express the actions e.g. This is a book. That is a chair. I am walking to the door. etc. Such situations are far from being realistic and one may conclude that efforts like these are not likely to help our pupils to use English to achieve communicative purposes.

Phonological aspects

There are some hints about stress and intonation and some problematic sounds such as (P), (S) & (Z) in plurals. However the following points to be reconsidered as they are not dealt with adequately :

1. The sounds (tf), (v) that are different from Arabic.
2. The different phonemic valves of letters which do not exist in Arabic e.g. (S) as in single , ceiling.
3. The observable interference that results from the fact that in Arabic clusters of two or more consonnemts are not allowed should be explained by clearer examples like (milk) ----- (milik) (sm uk)---- (ism uk)

Conclusion

In the above dissussion concentration has been made on the aspects that need to be changed. It has not been my intention in this documents to provide general evaluation of the syllabus e.g. the positive as well as the negative aspects. Consideration has been given to the parts that need to be modified even if the syllabus is to be retained as it is. In addition to that a brief attention was also given to those aspects which are 'inherent' in the nature of the structural approach. However, the present curriculum may provide practice which emphesises the 'signification' of the structures whereas their 'value' will be missing.

Change or at least modification can therefore, be strongly recommended, I firmly believe that the type of change or modification would motivate the learners as well as the teachers specially that school initiated innovation in our country cannot be expected at least at present and in the near future.

Proposals for change

On the basis of the above discussion I would like to present the following alternatives for discussion and criticisum, so that one of them may be adopted as a main strategy for improving the English curriculum at the Unity school level. In fact the dissatisfaction with the structural approach lead many institutions in different parts of the world to consider different kinds and level of change. The changes varied from a complete change like the procedurl syllabus represented by the 'Banglore communicational project' and the communicative approach to language teaching to adding communicative dimensions to the structural curriculum as alternative, II & III suggest.

Alternative I.

Adopting a communicative approach

This approach has been adopted by some Arab countries e.g. the Gulf States where reports showed reasonable progress. An attempt is also being made in the Northern Sector of the home land (North Yemen) of which we have, unfortunately, no information.

The syllabus would be functional structural taking into consideration the semi-preditable needs and interests of the learners.

This approach seems to be an attractive one and it can be useful and motivating for both teachers and students. However, the implementation would necessarily require a lot of efforts.

I. A team of materials writers who are acquainted with the latest developments in E L T should be appointed to work on the basis of an agreed plan of action. Possible foreign aids and expertise would also be useful and helpful.

2. Teachers attitudes to language and language learning and teaching would have to be changed. This could be done through in-service teacher training as well as the pre-service training at college level and the utilization of mass media where possible.

3. The new materials should be analysed and tried out before the wide-scale application.

4. Testing and examination techniques should be changed to suit the new approach.

Expected difficulties

I. The learners' needs are not obvious. This will make the selection and grading of the syllabus a difficult job.

2. The communicative competence of the vast majority of teachers is too weak in which case the learners attempts to learn the F L would be negatively affected. One can only hope that the teachers standard would be improved during the process of implemention.

3. The production of communicative materials may take a rather long time because of the lack of experience in this field.

4. Due to the big number of students in most classrooms, the great number of untrained teachers and the lack of educational technology the curriculum will inevitably be a constraints based one.

5. It is expected that this type of change will cost a lot of money which we may not be able to afford without generous aids.

An Eclectic Approach

Justifications:

I. As we are dealing with a general course for beginners whose needs are not obvious and the groups are hetrogenous, it may not be convenient and appropriate to take functions as the basic units of organization for the syllabus.

2. The fact that there is no one-to-one correspondence between form and function allow us to take the structural parts of the syllabus as the basic units of organization.

According to this approach the following things can be done at syllabus level:

I. The present structures will be retained.

2. Possible functions will be added to the existing structures so that their communicative value can be seen. This will make the structures meaningful, less abstract and more motivating to learn.

3. The syllabus will be structural - functional.

4. Suggestions will be made to teachers and materials writers regarding the situations in which the structures may be used so that unrealistic presentation can be avoided.

5. Specific objectives will be prepared for every unit such that the learning results can be indicated. This will make the purpose of teaching and learning obvious and consequently evaluation and feed back will be easier.

Materials and teaching methods

The principles of communicative methodology will be used to design materials and suggest teaching methods (See alternative III).

This approach differs from the first one in that it retains the present structures and attempts to improve them by adding possible language functions.

Alternative III

Adding communicative dimension

At syllabus level

I. The present structures will be retained.

2. Suggestions will be made regarding the situations in which the structures can be used as well as suitable situations for classroom presentation.

3. The different points mentioned in the review will be taken into consideration.

Materials and methods

It is here that the important changes are going to be made, concentration will be made on the learning tasks which play a leading role in language learning and acquisition. This may be done as follows:

^^ mechanical exercises and drills should be avoided and more meaningful ones may be designed (See below).

^^ tasks should be designed to help the process of learning rather than test outcomes as the present exercises do.

^^ I believe that what is needed in our case is a change in methodology and learning activities and tasks. Although the syllabus does not contain elements like functions, notions which are important parts of the communicative syllabus, the principles of the communicative methodology. (purpose, information gap, choice, feedback, transfer, skill integration, fluency) may be applied. Needless to say that the application of those principles will require new materials which need to be tried out in pilot schools.

Abdulla A.Rehman Alkaff

Head, English Language Section,

Educational Research Centre.

A D E N .